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Pentagon stymies electronic spying

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By Walter Andrews
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The Defense Department said yesterday it has taken measures to prevent electronic spying on long-distance phone conversations from the high ground of the new Soviet Embassy, which has a direct line of sight to the Pentagon.

The construction of the embassy on Mount Alto in northwest Washington near the Naval Observatory was opposed by U.S. intelligence agencies 10 years ago when the site was selected. But their objections were overridden by a Nixon administration concerned about continuing detente.

"The concern is that the location of not only the Soviet Embassy but various other points in town could allow them [the Soviets] to be in the line of sight of microwave [long-distance phone] transmissions and that those are easily intercepted," said Pentagon spokesman Michael Burch.

"We're aware of the potential threat, and we think we've taken the proper precautions," the spokesman said.

He declined to say specifically what measures had been taken. But he said, "In a generic sense, you can minimize the amount of classified information that's transmitted by microwaves by using local [underground] lines and secure [scrambled] voice telephone."

Mr. Burch added, "You can shield buildings and facilities so they don't radiate electronic signals."

He was asked if the new embassy had caused the Pentagon to build special underground lines to secure the transmission of classified information.

"No, we feel that our transmission facilities for such information are adequate for the time being," Mr. Burch replied. He noted that there had been congressional testimony on the need to upgrade some of these voice communications systems.

The main thing, he said, is getting Pentagon personnel to use the special secure communications systems "because the telephone lines in this building are owned by C&P Telephone and are not secure. So the danger always exists that people will attempt to discuss classified information on unsecured lines."

Ray Cline, a former State Department intelligence director, told The Washington Times last July that "the intelligence agencies all resisted it [the new Soviet Embassy location], but there was strong pressure from [Secretary of State Henry] Kissinger and President Nixon to go along for the sake of detente."

The new U.S. Embassy in Moscow is located in a swamp on low ground, surrounded by office buildings.

"They've got it set up so they can eavesdrop on us pretty easily, but we'll have a hard time if we ever want to eavesdrop on them," Mr. Cline said.